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ABSTRACT

Adults use linguistic context to assist in understanding words that may have multiple meanings. However, elementary school children are not able consistently to use this method of clarifying ambiguity. Research has shown that a three-component training method can help upper elementary school students develop the use of linguistic context. To utilize this method, some particular classroom experiences have been suggested and used. These include: developing sentence sets that demonstrate possible variations in the meaning of a word in different settings, asking children to discuss different meaning emphases of a word in different sentences and then to create a sentence surrounded by two other sentences that clarify the meaning of the target sentence, and having students place apparently anomalous word uses into settings that make sense of the usages and then having them collect further illustrations from their reading. (TJ)

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Use of Linguistic Context in the Reduction of Meaning Alternatives

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Abstract

In many language investigations, adult listeners and readers have demonstrated competence in reducing meaning alternatives through the use of linguistic context. There is some evidence, however, that secondary ("non-modal") meanings are troublesome for accomplished readers. This article discusses classroom experiences that provide opportunities for upper-grade students to note meaning emphasis alternatives (primary and secondary, "modal" and "non-modal") across linguistic contexts.

Use of Linguistic Context in the Resuction of Meaning Alternatives

The disambiguating and clarifying effect of linguistic context has been demonstrated repeatedly for adults (e.g., Anderson & Ortony, 1975; Anderson, Reynolds, Schallert, & Goetz, 1977; Barclay, Bransford, Franks, McCarrell, & Nitsch, 1974; Bransford & Johnson, 1973). Adult listeners and readers, it seems, use linguistic context to assist in the interaction between their prior knowledge systems and new linguistic input. The linguistic context dramatically reduces the alternatives available as the adult listeners and readers generate meanings for the input.

In a study (Garner, 1977) conducted with fifth-grade accomplished readers, on the other hand, consistently successful use of linguistic context was not evident. A critical variable in that study was use of primary and secondary meaning alternatives. The investigator presented sentences such as the following for "meat" and for 24 other nouns to 90 subjects in training and testing situations:

1. The man chewed the meat.
2. The man salted the meat.
3. The man graded the meat.

On a dependent variable task involving reading the input and dictating a continuation sentence, important differences related to primary and secondary meanings occurred. The difference in subject performance with primary or "modal"

meaning input (e.g., "chewed" above) versus secondary or "non-modal" input (e.g., "salted" and "graded" above) was highly significant, F (1, 84)=47.83, $p < .01$. Fifth-grade readers had substantial difficulty dictating continuation sentences for input emphasizing secondary meanings of familiar nouns.

However, within the same study, a three-component training method (1: reading a sentence, 2: sorting out from among meaning emphasis alternatives the important one in the sentence at hand, and 3: reading a feedback statement) did facilitate success on the continuation sentence dictation task. The facilitating effect of this method over sentence alone and sentence and statement alone treatments was again highly significant, F (1, 84)=50.89, $p < .01$. This training method seemed to block the widespread miscomprehension of secondary meanings of familiar nouns.

One of the most intriguing bits of information from this study is the finding that--despite uniformly high dependent variable performance by three-component training method subjects--the group did not always sort out the same meaning alternative as important to the sentence at hand in training. For the sentence, "The man graded the meat," for example, all of the following descriptions were selected at least once as most important:

the price of the meat
the taste of the meat
the source of the meat
the quality of the meat
the location of the meat

This finding would seem to suggest that the decision rendered may have been far less important in facilitating later task success that the process of entertaining options in meaning, of noting meaning emphasis alternatives across linguistic contexts.

Classroom Experiences with Meaning Alternatives

Given the demonstration of the power of this three-component training method within the linguistic context study, it seems appropriate to generate upper-grade classroom experiences that might similarly block the documented miscomprehension of secondary meanings of familiar words. Basic to this effort are two learnings by students:

1. Sets of alternative meanings exist for words naming objects and events; both primary and secondary meanings are important in different communication contexts.
2. In a given lingustic context, comprehension of the ideas in print requires attention to which alternatives (primary or secondary) are important and which alternatives are unimportant.

The three experiences suggested here have been tried in classrooms by pre-service and in-service teachers doing work at the University of Maryland. In many instances, the suggested activities have prompted creation by teachers and students of related experiences involving use of linguistic context in the reduction of meaning alternatives.

Sentence Sets

1. Ask students to provide a "vacuum" definition (no specified context) for a set of verbs under consideration.
2. Provide sentence sets that demonstrate dramatic variation in the "sense" of the verbs.

   e.g., The author read the story.
   The critic read the story.
   The first grader read the story

   The horse ran the mile.
   The poodle ran the mile.
   The criminal ran the mile.
3. Discuss the "sense" of the sentences, the variation in verb meanings and even in second noun meanings ("story," "mile") across sentences, the information brought to the page by listeners and readers. Discuss the adequacy of the various "vacuum" definitions to cover the "sense" of all sentences in the set.
4. Ask small groups of students to generate similar sets for sharing with the large group.

Sorting

1. Provide students in small groups with sentence pairs and with meaning emphasis options (on index cards).

   e.g., The child hunted the animals.
   In this sentence, the (wildness, age, habitat) of the animals is important.

The child petted the animals.

In this sentence, the (color, location, name) of the animals is important.

2. Ask the groups to discuss different meaning emphases across sentences. In the event of disagreement, good defenses must be made.
3. Ask the groups to write a sentence to precede the target sentence and a sentence to follow the target sentence. These expanded contexts (to be shared) should clarify meaning emphases.

Apparent Anomaly

1. Develop a packet of index cards, each card containing an example of a secondary or non-modal "sense" for the final noun in the sentence.

   e.g., The man triggered the door.

   The fellow sawed the meat.

   We airmailed the food.

2. Ask students to work individually to generate settings where each card "makes sense." (These settings may be converted to print, and may not be.)
3. Organize students into small-group workshops, where they can react to each others' settings.
4. Ask students to watch for similar instances in their reading. Instances discovered in print should be transferred to cards and added to the packet.

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